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JOHN SYNGE AND HIS OLD FRENCH FARCE

BY GERTRUDE SCHOEPPERLE

IF the plots of Shakespeare and Molière are not original, it would seem unnecessary to require originality of plot from lesser men. But there is a feeling among critics of John Synge that his fame is smirched by the charge that his plots were drawn from books as well as life. The question of Synge's originality is not thus easily disposed of. It lies not in how much he has taken from others, but in how much he has modified what he has taken. An original writer, even when he makes a definite effort faithfully to reproduce another's thought, gives always something less or more, by word or comma or cadence, than that other. Shelley's and Browning's translations of Aeschylus are as much Shelley and Browning as they are Aeschylus.

Especially is it true of Synge that his personality is color where an imitator's is transparency, is sound where an imitator's is silence. A story which has passed into his mind is as water that has flowed into a still pool shut in by brooding, heather-flushed hills. A story woven into one of his plays is like a strain of some old folk story in the work of an ultra-modern musician. Although I shall show how *The Well of the Saints* was fed by a certain hidden spring, I am far from ascribing the virtues of that well to another source. On the contrary, this study serves to discover with extraordinary clearness how transforming a thing was Synge's genius, how entirely original with himself was his ironic vision and the miraculous power of phrase and image.

M. Bourgeois in his admirable book on Synge ranges himself with those Irish admirers who consider it necessary to defend their author against the charge of plagiarism. But although he rejects all previously suggested sources for *The Well of the Saints*, he cannot resist bringing forward one of his own: a story called

The Maid of Malines which forms the fourth chapter of Lord Lytton's *The Pilgrims of the Rhine* (1832).

M. Bourgeois admits that Synge himself, when questioned on the subject, said he had never read or heard of *The Pilgrims of the Rhine*. Indeed, the characters, the situations (except one), and the *milieu* have little in them to suggest his play. On the contrary, he told Padraic Colum and William Butler Yeats that he had got the idea of *The Well of the Saints* from a pre-Molière French farce, the name of which he had forgotten.

The number of pre-Molière French farces is so limited that a systematic search through them is not a difficult task. But one looks in vain for a plot resembling *The Well of the Saints*.

Surprisingly enough, it is in the religious drama of the Middle Ages that Synge's "farce" is to be found. The *Mystère de Saint Martin*, composed in the fifteenth century, ends with a miracle performed by the dead body of the saint: Two comrades, Jolestru, a blind man, and Haustebet, a cripple, well satisfied with infirmities which yield them an easy living, have heard tell of the marvellous cures brought about by the remains of Saint Martin. They are both in terror of coming inadvertently upon the procession bearing his body. They know it is to pass somewhere in the vicinity before long. How can they avoid the unlucky train? The miracle is imminent. How escape it? They take themselves off, the blind man carrying the cripple, the cripple using his eyes to direct the blind man. But in vain. They stumble straight into the path of the procession and are healed in spite of themselves. The blind man sees; the cripple walks. After a moment of rebellion they resign themselves to the miracle and join in thanksgiving.

The anonymous *mystère* was reprinted in 1841, and Synge might perhaps have found a copy of it in Paris. But although his biographers have much to say of his fondness for Old French farces, they say nothing of any inclination toward mystery plays, which have indeed a well-established reputation for dulness. Synge did not read Old French, or indeed any foreign language, with great ease, and we can hardly believe he would have labored through the long, edifying life of Saint Martin in black letter, in order to find the rather diverting beggars at the end. Fortu-

nately this was not the only form in which their story was accessible.

Already in 1496 a certain Andrieu de la Vigne of La Rochelle had been struck by the dramatic possibilities of the posthumous miracle and had had the happy idea of treating it as an independent drama. It had come about in this way: de la Vigne had undertaken to provide a three-day dramatic entertainment for the people of Seurre near Dijon, in honor of Saint Martin, whose abbey had long been the ornament of the town. He had chosen to dramatize the life from the Latin *Vita Sancti Martini* of Sulpicius Severus (365–425). He seems also to have been acquainted with the anonymous *mystère* which we have mentioned. But whether because he disdained its rather wooden style, or because he had almost completed the work before he had access to it, he made use of little more than the incident of the blind man and the cripple. This he detached from the *mystère* and treated as a separate play, with the title: *Moralité de l'aveugle et du boiteux*. To the *mystère* and the *moralité* he added a *Farce du munyer de qui le diable emporte l'ame en enfer*, modeled on the fabliau *Le Pet au Vilain* by Rutebeuf. The three constituted a characteristic medieval trilogy: *mystère, moralité et farce*. The poet's purpose was to give the spectators a due amount of edification in the *mystère*, to follow it by a piece in which the corpse of St. Martin played a secondary rôle, and, finally, breaking loose altogether from the restraint of the good man's presence, to send his audience home laughing over a bit of low comedy in which the only figures not altogether secular were a little devil and an intriguing priest. It is impossible to read de la Vigne without being struck by his likeness to Synge. This court poet of Charles VIII had the same peculiar combination of verve and satire, the same delight in scenes from low life, the same surface laughter, and the same underlying violence and bitterness that we find in *The Well of the Saints*.

De la Vigne called *L'aveugle et le boiteux* a *moralité*. The term was used in the Middle Ages to designate a didactic piece in verse, inspired by an edifying intention or simply a philosophical idea. Although the notion of allegory is frequently associated with the term *moralité*, its use was really not an essential characteristic:

it was the intention of moralizing that marked the *genre*. Certain *moralités* which dealt with historical personages are little different from the *mystères*. Others, among them our *L'aveugle et le boiteux*, are scarcely discernible from farces except by their didactic intention, always persistent, but often concealed beneath their other purpose, that of amusing the spectators. It is curious that the form which seems to us characteristically Synge's should have been so common in the Middle Ages as to constitute a *genre*. *The Shadow of the Glen*, *The Tinker's Wedding*, *The Playboy of the Western World* are just that hybrid thing which the fifteenth century called *moralité joyeuse* or *farce morale*.

De la Vigne's *mystère* has not yet found an editor, but his *moralité* and his farce have enjoyed more favor. Francisque Michel published them among his *Poésies du XV^e et XVI^e siècle*, Edouard Fournier in his *Théâtre avant la Renaissance*, and Paul La Croix in his *Recueil des farces de la Bibliothèque Gauloise*. The last named volume contains only one other play besides the Pathelin pieces and de la Vigne's *moralité* and farce. It was probably in this collection that Synge made the acquaintance of *L'aveugle et le boiteux*, since he referred to the piece as a "pre-Molière farce."

A short time after reading de la Vigne's *moralité*, my idea that it was the piece that had suggested *The Well of the Saints* received interesting confirmation. Without saying anything of the medieval play, I asked Mr. Padraic Colum to tell me what he remembered of Synge's remarks about the farce that had suggested to him *The Well of the Saints*. "What I remember distinctly," he replied, "is the picture Synge gave me, the man being carried on to the stage on the shoulders of someone." It is an interesting case of visual memory that the image of *L'aveugle et le boiteux* should have lingered for some twenty years in the poet's mind, when he had forgotten, if indeed Synge had ever told him, that, of the two beggars, the one was blind and the other a cripple, and that the blind man carried the cripple on his back.

The incident of *L'aveugle et le boiteux* in the anonymous *mystère* is not well enough told to interest a modern reader. The only dramatic moment is when the two comrades run to avoid

the saint. In de la Vigne's play, however, the scene is made to yield a good deal of dramatic suspense. The two beggars, strangers to each other when the play begins, are coming from opposite directions whining for alms. They discover each other's presence and compare their infirmities. When the blind man falls to lamenting the loss of the boy who had served him as guide, the cripple suggests a partnership. With many mishaps the blind man gropes his way toward him, and the cripple mounts on his back. A bit of unsavory business, less likely to be found humorous by a modern audience than by a fifteenth century one, brings them again on their separate feet, and at this moment they hear the trumpets announcing the procession which bears the body of the saint.

In the older *mystère* the partnership has been formed in the hope, cherished by both, of avoiding just this encounter. Once cured, however, both had united in praising God, and the *mystère* had come to an edifying conclusion with this incident, the archdeacon and Bricet calling upon the spectators to learn from the miracle to put themselves in Saint Martin's charge.

Andrieu de la Vigne's *moralité*, not bearing the burden of furnishing a conclusion for the *mystère*, can afford to end on a less edifying note. The author takes advantage of this freedom in order to differentiate his two beggars, and, by the contrast, to heighten the dramatic effect. The blind man is a simple fellow, eager to learn more of the saint, and get healing. The cripple, however, knows the world, and opens the other's eyes to the market value of his infirmity. The blind man is thus persuaded to join his fellow in the effort to avoid the miracle. When, however, they are overtaken by the procession, and are made whole, the air is rent by the thanksgiving of the one and the curses of the other.

The sudden and unexpected sound of the approaching procession, the frantic efforts of the two beggars stumbling about in various directions to avoid it, the blind man's confusion of mind before the miracle, and their opposite emotions after it—all these in de la Vigne's play are presented with much dramatic art. It was these scenes, no doubt, that appealed to Synge, for he has used all of them in *The Well of the Saints*. With what added effect we shall now briefly indicate.

L'aveugle et le boiteux and *The Well of the Saints* have the same opening scene of the two beggars in the road, crying for alms.

THE BLIND MAN. Alms for one penniless and blind,
Who never yet hath seen at all!

THE CRIPPLE. Pray, to the poor lame man be kind
With gout he cannot trudge or crawl!

In Synge the two beggars, Martin Doul and his wife Mary, are both blind.

MARTIN DOUL. Leave a bit of silver for blind Martin, your honor.

Leave a bit of silver, or a penny copper itself, and we'll be praying the Lord to bless you and you going the way.

In both plays, when the blind man has first been healed, he cries out with thanksgiving and joy. The words of the mediæval beggar are the phrases of conventional piety, with a platitude added on the value of good eyesight:

THE BLIND MAN. I'm henceforth in this good saint's debt.
I see as never I saw before.
What a great fool I was to let
Myself be cozened into fleeing,
There's nothing, search the wide world o'er
That to my mind's as good as seeing.

It seems to be very good eyesight that he has gained, for his first glance embraces two provinces or more:

THE BLIND MAN. I was a very dunderhead
To leave the good safe road, and tread
The doubtful by-path, wandering.
Alas, full little had I guessed
That clear sight was so great a thing
Now I can look on fair Savoy,
And Burgundy and France the blest.
Humbly I thank God for this joy.

But Martin Doul's thanksgiving is vivid with green fern and blue sky. His words are touched with the extravagant fancy native to Ireland's peasants, fed on tales of Padraic and Brigit and Columcille in their gold and silver and crystal chairs in heaven, and the Kings of the East making pilgrimages with boxes of gold and frankincense and myrrh. And it is not only the beauty of the visible world that the miracle is to bring Martin

Doul, but the first sight of his wife, "the beautiful dark woman" whom he has heard called "the great wonder of the West":

MARTIN DOUL (ecstatically). O, glory be to God, I see now surely . . . I see the walls of the church, and the green bits of ferns in them, and yourself, holy father, and the green width of the sky.

He runs out, half-foolish with joy, and comes past Mary Doul (his wife) as she scrambles to her feet, drawing a little away from her as he goes by.

TIMMY (to the others). He doesn't know her at all.

MARTIN DOUL (crying out joyfully). That's Timmy, I know Timmy by the black of his head. . . . That's Mat Simon, I know Mat Simon by the length of his legs. (*He sees Molly Byrne on Mary Doul's seat, and his voice changes completely.*) O, it was no lie they told me, Mary Doul, O, glory be to God and the seven saints I didn't die and not see you at all. The blessing of God on the water and the feet carried it round through the land. The blessing of God on this day, and them that brought me the Saint, for its grand hair you have (*she lowers her head, a little confused*) and soft skin, and eyes would make the saints, if they were dark awhile and seeing again, fall down out of the sky. (*He goes nearer to her.*) Hold up your head, Mary, the way I'll see it's richer I am than the great kings of the east.

The medieval beggar had foreseen the disadvantages which the miracle would entail. A sound man must toil and be glad of a bit of bread, where the beggar gets dainties; he must carry an empty purse where the beggar can count his coins.

THE CRIPPLE. Why, when I'm cured I'll waste away
Of hunger. Everyone will shout
"Be off and do some honest labor."
No, you'll not find one that saint's neighbor;
For if he fixed me up, they'd call
Me vagabond, and one would bawl:
"That brazen rascal, sound of limb,
The galleys are the place for him."

.
I tell you I care not a straw
To go and have the saint remove
My malady.

.
I dare pledge if he cured you wholly
In a short time you'd feel regret.
Folk would not give you anything
But bread, and never would you get
A tasty bit.

THE BLIND MAN. May Heaven bring
 Some great doom on my head or let
 Them strip from off my skin
 Enough for two belts ere I'd set
 My eyes on him.

THE CRIPPLE. Think, too, how thin
 Your purse would be.

Although Synge's beggar is also a shrewd fellow in his way, he has to learn by experience what he loses with his blindness. Healed of it, he must sweat and toil long days in the shop of Timmy the Smith:

MARTIN DOUL. It's more I got a while since, and I sitting blinded in Grianan, than I get in this place, working hard, and destroying myself, the length of the day.

But what Martin most bitterly regrets is the loss of his illusions about life. His fancied world of beauty must give way now to the ugliness that makes up too large a part of the world he sees:

MARTIN DOUL. I do be thinking it's well for the blind don't be seeing the gray clouds driving on the hill, and don't be looking on people with their noses red, the like of your nose, and their eyes weeping and watering the like of your eyes, God help you, Timmy the Smith.

. . . and it should be a hard thing for the Almighty God to be looking on the world, bad days, and on men the like of yourself walking round on it, and they slipping each way in the muck.

Bitterest of all the bitter things that blindness had spared him is the sight of his wife. They had mocked him, he finds, when they called her "the great wonder of the West." The poor "old wizendy hag" that he had drawn away from as he passed is his mate, and they are both a "pair of pitiful shows." In his horror he cries out cruelly:

Go on now to be seeking a lonesome place where the earth can hide you away; go on now, I'm saying, or you'll be having men and women with their knees bled, and they screaming to God for a holy water would darken their sight, for there's no man but would liefer be blind a hundred years, or a thousand itself, than to be looking on your like.

The plight of the medieval beggar deprived of his trade is farce; but this "little old shabby stump of a man," "with fat

legs on him and the little neck like a ram," is a tragic figure. He is tragic because of the terrible intensity of his vision, because he is stung to madness by the sight of age rotting for the grave and "youth shining . . . like a high lamp would drag in the ships out of the sea." In *The Well of the Saints*, Synge has found words to make us feel the anguish which has haunted poets from the beginning of time, the anguish of watching beauty fade, and all things decay, and standing helpless to see youth "running toward the sod of his death."

In the medieval play, when the cripple has been healed in spite of his efforts to escape, he curses the saint.

In Synge's play also the beggars fail to avoid their would-be benefactors, but when the saint is lifting the can to drop the holy water upon Martin Doull, the blind man dashes it from his hand and sets it rocketing across the stage.

In the medieval play, when the body of the saint approaches, there is a great scurry to get away. The beggars seek frantically for some place to hide. The comedy is entirely in the action. The dialogue serves only to punctuate it:

THE BLIND MAN. Listen, I say.

THE LAME MAN. Listen to what?

THE BLIND MAN. Whatever's making that to-do?

THE LAME MAN. Perhaps the saint!

THE BLIND MAN. Horrible thought
No longer we'd be catered to.
Hark?

THE LAME MAN. After it the whole town chases.

THE BLIND MAN. Go, look, what's making all the pother.

THE LAME MAN. Bad luck is close upon our traces.
Good master, it's the saint, no other.

THE BLIND MAN. Quick, let's be off, we must not bide
I fear he'll catch us after all.

THE LAME MAN. Under some window let us hide
Or in the corner of a wall.
Look out, don't trip.

THE BLIND MAN. The devil's in it,—
To fall at such an awkward minute.

THE LAME MAN. Pray God he do not spy us here
Too cruel would be our estate.

THE BLIND MAN. My heart is bitten through with fear
We've fallen upon an evil fate.

THE LAME MAN. Lie low, my master, take good care,
And we'll crawl off beneath some stair.

In the third act of Synge's play blindness is again mercifully falling upon Martin and Mary DouL, and their sight has again grown dim. They draw together from old habit, delighted to return to their old differences of opinion and the familiar roadside life of dreams. They have found a new illusion to cherish: Mary, the beauty of the soft white hair she will have soon; and Martin "the beautiful long, white, silken, streamy beard" that she will envy him. Suddenly they hear a sound. They are terrified at the prospect of being healed again, and, like the French beggars, use all their wits and agility to escape. But here there is more than the rough comedy of action. There is wit, and there is pathos; for the Irish beggars distinguish between the protection of God and the meddling of saints, and know the worthlessness of their novitiate in ways of seeing:

A faint sound of a bell is heard.

MARY DOUL. It's not the churches, for the wind is blowing from the sea.

MARTIN DOUL (with dismay). It's the old saint, I'm thinking, ringing his bell.

MARY DOUL. The Lord protect us from the saints of God! (*They listen.*) He's coming this road surely.

MARTIN DOUL (tentatively). Will we be running off, Mary DouL?

MARY DOUL. What place would we run?

MARTIN DOUL. There's the little path going up through the sloughs. . . . If we reached the bank above, where the elders do be growing, no person would see a sight of us, if it was a hundred yeomen were passing itself; but I'm afeared after the time we were with our sight we'll not find our way to it at all.

They grope about the gap, stumbling amid the roots of a fallen tree. With much difficulty they make their way to an elder bush behind the church, and with many precautions crouch in it, unconscious that they are plainly visible.

The Well of the Saints, in all it has of poignancy and poetry, in all it has of joy in the beauty of the sensible world, in all its richness of imagery and intensity of passion, is Synge's and Synge's alone. The story of a blind man's partnership with a cripple, however, is as old as Confucius, and has been retold in every

generation, no doubt, from his time to ours. We have an account of the healing of two beggars by Saint Martin, which was written down as early as the tenth century. In *The Golden Legend* (1298) the miracle is performed by Saint Martin upon a blind man and a cripple who had been aiding each other to escape it. The story is retold again and again in the Middle Ages, in vernacular verse as well as in medieval drama and Latin hagiography.

Andrieu de la Vigne was the first, it seems, to envisage it as satire. It is striking to see how closely Synge holds, in dramatic essentials, to the treatment of the Burgundian poet. In both plays the characters are a composite of *naïveté*, superstition, and shrewdness. The situations, as we have just seen, although their sequence is different, are strikingly similar. The *milieu* is the same: low life in a community in which the doctrines of the medieval Church are accepted with whole heart and literal mind. In both there is the intention of satire. Behind both there is the spirit of bitter rebellion. In a world such as this, they say, it is better to be blind than to see, better to be still than to move, better not to be than to be.

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